NON-STOP INERTIA
An Interview with Ivor Southwood

Here's my interview with Ivor Southwood about his book *Non-Stop Inertia* (Zero Books, 2011).

The book argues that the appearance of restless activity in our society conceals and maintains a deep paralysis of thought and action.

Ivor Southwood has worked as a mental health nurse and studied literature and media. He has also done various temporary jobs and is interested in the culture of precarious work.

(1) What does the title of your book, 'Non-Stop Inertia', refer to?

It represents a perpetual sort of crisis that people seem to be in, in everyday life. There's this sense of always having to look for the next thing, having to sort everything out – this sort of endless circulating, networking, competing, and always passing through somewhere on the way to somewhere else. It's sort of a vicious circle. But this is presented as 'how it is' or a self-imposed situation – that's quite important, I think.

The title draws attention to the contradiction in that – in that we're in a loop of anxiety and we're not really getting anywhere. There's a sort of frenetic activity and we're not really achieving anything at all. And there's this sense of freedom all the time, but is it really freedom? Has this sort of mobility and availability and stuff – has it actually made us free in the way that we're told that it has?

And I suppose I'm thinking as well, in the title, that there's the implication that if we were to stop in some way, we could see the scenery clearly and see each other clearly, and that the scenery wouldn't be blurred. We might be able to see an exit, or a way of improving things.

(2) In the book you seem to suggest that our society of non-stop inertia is reflected in 24 hours news channels.

24 hour news is extraordinary in that it sort of has to fill every possible space, and there's a sense that things aren't given time to develop. An event is reported on as it's happening or even before it's happening. And there's this sense that there isn't really room for any sort of critical space. It's also in this sort of strange, virtual area. A lot of the stuff is presented in some of these graphics and some of these places which don't really exist. And again we're always passing through on this sort of narrative, and there's this sense of 'Is it really getting anywhere?' - a sort of futility, I suppose. Yes, I think there is this sort of common thing there for someone to develop further.

(3) Why have people accepted a society of non-stop inertia? Why aren't they resisting it?

It's clear that certain factors have been put together to stop people resisting it. You sort of feel helpless, that you can't resist, that you have to go along, that you have to go with the flow. There's a lot behind that. As an individual – in the face of the dismantling of unions, insecurity, the wage gap, etc. – you've got few resources to draw on. I think that all contributes to it. Now, obviously, with mobile devices and stuff like that people are encouraged to exist in their own little bubble and

connections are very difficult to establish. But that push towards individualisation and insecurity has a lot to do with it.

(4) Towards the end of the first chapter, you refer to Marcuse's book 'One-Dimensional Man'. Do you agree with his thesis that we're living in a one-dimensional society?

Marcuse's book was written, I think, in the early 60s. I was reading it at the same time I was beginning to formulate some of the ideas in 'Non-stop Inertia' and I just thought, 'God, we're in this now!'

Party politics has a lot to do with what might be perceived as a one-dimensional society. I think there's a lot to say about the sort of almost interchangeability of the way that Labour and the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats are all basically on the same page - that lack of an alternative. Mark Fisher talks about 'capitalist realism' – that sense that there's only one way to go.

I've been thinking lately that it's quite useful to think of the Labour party as actually being part of the Coalition. And that feeds into this idea of our society being one-dimensional. It's another way of thinking they're performing an act of being the opposition, but in fact they're really not proposing to undo anything that's been done. And they'd quite happily come in and use it in the same way that New Labour used Thatcherism as a sort of foundation for the next stage.

(5) In order to demonstrate your argument that we're living in a society of non-stop inertia, you explore the contemporary workplace and its related settings and introduce the reader to the term 'precarity'. Could you tell us what this term means?

My understanding of 'precarity' is that it came out of the transition to post-Fordist ways of working – out of the period of Fordism and stability. People were sold an idea that they were being unchained from industry and having a boring job for life, and that they would be endlessly mobile, aspiring characters. But it seems to me that the price for all of that is a constant nagging insecurity. The idea of precarity is this sort of machinery of anxiety. It's a sort of a technology in the workplace and in culture, which has been introduced and extended, and allows us to keep on functioning.

That's not to say that we should be striving to return to how it was before - we couldn't anyway because the world's changed. But we have to break free from this new form of imprisonment or subjugation that precarity represents. We have to not believe the myths that we are these free subjects anymore. If we're moving towards something else, maybe it would be autonomy rather than precarity.

So, precarity is insecurity and being in a precarious economic state, and, in practical terms, things like agency work, endlessly re-applying for jobs and stuff like that. And all of that is being sold as a positive thing by people who are basically using it as a way of cutting down on labour costs.

(6) There's also a psychological dimension to the term 'precarity' as well, isn't there? In the book you say that it describes a fear of losing one's job (because one needs the money from it) and a simultaneous desire to see one's job end (because one's job is boring).

Yes. Again, going back to what I was saying before about why resistance is difficult: You need the job to carry on and you also don't want it to carry on. It's having to carry that sort of contradiction around

in your head in whatever tasks you're doing at work. There's that fear and all other stuff as well - like housing, the welfare system, etc. – which feeds into that fear. Yes, definitely, there's a psychological element going on there.

(7) Is it only people in short-term employment that exist in a state of precariousness?

I think it's becoming much more widespread. There is an argument that I feel there is something in: That certain parts of society have always been precarious, and have always felt precarity, but that now a lot of people who under Fordism might have been protected to some extent, and people in public sector work, are now experiencing it for the first time. This sense of everything being on the point of being rearranged seems to be becoming the norm.

(8) Why does there seem to be no discussion of precarity in mainstream politics?

It doesn't seem to be in any of the main party's interest to discuss it. It's tied to aspiration and individualistic consumerism. As I got home today, I was reading about the Natcen report that came out, about social attitudes today. There was a statement from David Cameron on it, and it's kind of terrifying. He turned this thing about how people should look after themselves and that poverty is your own fault into a positive thing to try to promote his so-called 'Big Society'. He says, 'These are the values that I've been talking about for years.' And there's this sense that this government wants to take advantage of this – regardless of whether this survey is actually representative of British people's views or not – and get behind it and push it. And they say it's a way of helping to build a bigger, stronger society. When you're up against that I suppose it's no wonder that things like precarity aren't really widely discussed.

I think also there's the issue that precarity probably unites lots of disparate groups. And I think those groups have a lot of different interest and different standards of living and different ways of living. It's probably difficult - and it's probably something to aim for - to make links between these groups, which include agency workers, freelance creative workers, and casualised public sector workers - from immaterial labour through to manual labour. Maybe part of the reason precarity isn't discussed is that it doesn't represent one coherent group. It's lots of groups. Perhaps now is the time that some of those groups can communicate and find some common ground.

I've said several times as well that I would also like a kind of psychological discourse to surround precarity or the anxiety of insecurity. Instead of the kind of bland, Alain de Botton type stuff about work and how we feel about it, it would be good to have some sort of analytical interpretation of it from a psychotherapeutic perspective. It might be that I've just not seen it, but I've not come across anything from that direction so far.

(9) Why do you think there seems to be little discussion of precarity in the media?

Well, it obviously runs in the face of aspirational, distracting culture of the mainstream media, and also the superficial positivity that is pumped through things like BBC Radio One, reality TV and talent shows, etc. I suppose the only possible way of discussing it is to try to use one of those kinds of shows or texts and sort of turn it around in order to look at precarity.

(10) Another theoretical term you discuss in your exploration of the contemporary workplace is 'emotional labour'. Could you explain what this is?

It's an idea that Arlie Russell Hochschild was exploring in the 1970s. She introduced this phrase relating to the work involved in producing the product of yourself as a commodity - the smile and the appearance of customer service and all that sort of stuff. Also involved in emotional labour is the working up of a sort of synthetic enthusiasm for something, such as a product, which feeds into sales and jobs like that.

In the book, I look at how the term is applicable now, and, as with precarity, I think it seems to have spread a lot. In one sense there's what I call remote emotional labour, which is virtual media work, advertising, marketing, etc., and call centres. I'm also thinking about – again from a personal point of view - how Hochschild's traditional ideas of emotional labour – of selling yourself and of selling an experience to the customer – could be extended to the "jobseeker" and worker as well. You're selling yourself to your manager and your boss through a performance of enthusiasm and immersion in whatever tasks you're doing – looking as if you're giving 110% and all that crap. That applies whether you're in immaterial labour or in what would be old-fashioned manual labour: in a warehouse or something. It's still there. It's still a background to it – this sense that you have to appear to not just be doing what you're paid for, but enjoying it and feeling that it's the right thing for you.

As Hochschild also mentions, the effects of selling yourself starts to affect yourself and your identity. The commodified self starts to re-shape the real self. You come to believe your cover story, so to speak. Again, going back to what I was saying earlier about resistance – having to sell yourself has a huge impact on people, especially when you add a sense of self-failure and self-blame onto it, which helps people get into the part that they are playing.

(11) Do you think the cultural pressure to continually sell oneself is partly responsible for the popularity of social networking sites like Facebook?

Yes, unfortunately. I think with all of these things it's not the technology itself; it's how it is used. With social networking sites there's a sort of commodification and branding of oneself. One of the themes of my book is the internalised colonisation by Capital and by the commodifying of everything, including relationships. There's a risk of social networking becoming like that and becoming a sort of self-marketing duty.

(12) In the second section of the book you argue that almost all workplaces now resemble 'non-places'. What exactly do you mean by this?

Non-places is a term I cam across in a book by the anthropologist Mark Augé. He was talking about transitional places, in particular places like airports, supermarkets, and motorways, etc. These, I suppose, are part of the architecture of neoliberal capitalism, in that they seem frictionless although, of course, they aren't. People with long commutes to work, for example, are always coming across glitches.

We're spending more and more time in 'non-places'. People are commuting for longer and longer times. What kind of time is that? It's sort of non-time, in a way. It's time in a non-place. What can you actually do? Who are you with? You're not with your colleagues or with your friends. You're on your own with passengers who are not talking to each other. Non-places are places of solitude and also places where your identity is suspended.

Another aspect of non-places is amnesia. They kind of resist remembering. That possibly applies to a lot of work now. You finish one assignment and then you erase it and go on to the next one.

(13) Would you say the purpose of having workplaces resemble non-places is to disempower people by making them feel that they can't get a grip on the world around them?

Yes. As I said before, we can't go back to a Fordist world, but it has to be born in mind that the vast majority of people aren't looking for a new, dynamic challenge every month or something. Most people want stability. They want security and a decent standard of living, and time to look after their kids, and to know that they can live somewhere and pay all of their bills. You've got to have a certain kind of rootedness for that.

(14) In the third section of the book you look at how the boundaries that used to exist between work and non-work have become blurred and begin with a discussion of the term 'jobseeking'. Could you tell us why you don't like this term?

It turns a negative thing into a positive thing. You're not unemployed; you're seeking a job. There's also a pseudo-spiritual side to it – 'If you seek hard enough for work, you'll find it.' It's also individualising. It's denying a social, structural reason for why you are looking for a job.

(15) In the book you discuss your own experience of being unemployed and looking for work. Could you tell us a little about this?

In the book I mention how there's a deep acting – in terms of emotional labour – in trying to whore yourself to work agencies and a surface acting in visits to the job centre. With the job centre, you're going there to get your benefits – you need it. It's not really about any "opportunities" that they may want to make you aware of.

I'm aware that a lot of people who work in jobcentres – it must be a much worse place to work in now than it used to be. You hear this stuff about people, for instance, having to meet targets and being told to put people on to courses – that must be very depressing. You're met with a person you've got to try to force those courses on to – it's just mutually awful, I think.

Going back to non-places: Jobcentres are a bit like banks – they have a sort of oppressive, cheerful imagery that goes along with them, which is like someone shining a bright light into your face. There are all these images of happy people, smiling, holding hands, etc., which you know doesn't relate to reality – and the person seeing you, the jobcentre worker, knows that as well.

(16) While we're on the subject of unemployment – what do you think of the UK Coalition government's "Work Programme"?

The "Work Programme" basically involves people who have been unemployed for a certain length of time and – I haven't got the information to hand, but it depends on what age you are, however many months you've been employed, etc. – being handed over to a company that aims to help them get a job. Probably the most well-known companies would be A4E. There's also G4S as well – a security company, which says something, doesn't it?

The "Work Programme", like the individualisation of employment, is marketed in this way as if it frees people - you need to just train them, rehabilitate them, give them the skills they need, etc., then they'll get a job. It's a combination of putting people in a room and holding them there while they look in newspapers and stuff for jobs and also putting them onto this thing called 'work-related activity' – which is unpaid work for periods of time, where an employer gets free labour.

For me, at a time when unemployment is going up and up, the "Work Programme" is like criminalising people. It's like teaching people a lesson for being unemployed. People need to organise against it.

(17) Towards the end of your examination of unemployment you say that "jobseeking" has become a career. Could you explain how?

It's taken the place of occupation, in the traditional sense – the part of people's minds to do with what they give is now to do with what they are seeking to do or what they want to do. And it's become a career. Apart from what we've already discussed with being a "jobseeker" and the duties involved in that in order to get your welfare benefit, there's also the job of "jobseeking" while you are working, especially with short-term contracts. There's this thing of having to always look busy and impress the boss in order to carry on in your job, which is a kind of career in itself – it becomes more important than whatever the nominal duties of your job are.

(18) In the final chapter of your book, you look at possible means of resisting our culture of non-stop inertia. Could you tell us about one of these?

As most people are looking for stability, revolutionary acts or sudden upheavals are unfortunately off the table. We need to try to find other ways of making progress. One way I talk about in the book is this idea of estrangement – trying to distance yourself from what you're having to do, withholding your emotional labour or that enthusiasm that's become a kind of standard requirement.

To extend the idea of occupation – I suggest it's important to try to re-occupy yourself and your own thoughts and mind, and to try to evict the language of aspiration and fun that attaches itself to most work.

(19) Most work already estranges people from themselves, doesn't it? Isn't there a danger that if people estrange themselves further they might perhaps lose themselves completely?

I agree that most work is already alienating. But I think there is a sense of what I would call immersion as well as alienation. A lot of things we've been discussing have come along recently, and the internalisation of this stuff, and the reliance on technology, etc., means that we are immersed in this environment and we need to somehow unplug it or get our heads out of it slightly. That's what I'm thinking about with estrangement or distancing. It's become so familiar that one way out is to try to make it strange again.

(20) In his 1932 essay 'In Praise of Idleness', Bertrand Russell says: "I think there is far too much work done in the world, [and] that immense harm is caused by the belief that work is virtuous". Do you agree with him?

Yes, absolutely - especially at the moment. The harder you work the more work you're making for somebody else, or the more harm you're doing to the environment. There's nothing virtuous about that, is there?

'Non-Stop Inertia' is published by Zero Books: http://www.zero-books.net/

The address of Ivor Southwood's blog is: http://screened-out.blogspot.com/

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